

The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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THE ATTITUDE OF MIND.

WHENEVER I am asked by students which is the most important thing in the writer's craft,—plot, or style, or vivid characterization,—I am tempted to reply: "None of these. The most important thing is The Attitude of Mind."

Of all factors in the way of a writer's success the heaviest is discouragement. No one is more subject to this cramping influence than the literary worker. To begin with, he or she is peculiarly temperamental. And few are the spirits resolute enough to stand up, for an extended period, to a succession of unvaried rejections—the inevitable lot of the beginning writer. Some students feel aggrieved because work which seems good to them is turned down by the editors, while those who have the discernment to see that their work is lacking in important qualities are in despair over their inability to reach the standard they desire to attain.

In cases where the discouragement is based upon inability to sell stories, it is easy to diagnose the difficulty. The writer who makes acceptances his whole purpose—who considers his time wasted unless it brings financial return—is rarely the one who achieves success. His joy is not sufficiently in the work itself.

For this writer, and for the more advanced soul whose despair is that his work never comes up to his own exacting standard, the same attitude of mind can profitably be cultivated. Realize this: It is positively as foolish for the writer to strain for power of narration as it would be for the third grade schoolboy to fret for the time when he shall graduate and reach man's stature. In due course of natural growth, the boy will inevitably reach his full stature; but no straining will appreciably hasten that time.

Physical growth, as we know, is dependent upon a proper admixture of food and exercise. If we are forced to lie motionless for an extended period, our unused muscles will atrophy. The boy can best aid his development into manly strength and stature by using his muscles in normal activities, and by taking such nourishment as his system demands. So it is that, to grow as a writer, one must have regular mental exercise of the proper kind. One

must write and thereby develop the power to write. This is the universal law of growth. It is a normal, not a forced development, and the results are *inevitable*.

Knowing, then, that as long as he is exercising his faculties, such exercises will eventually bring him full power, why should any writer become discouraged? You would laugh at the ten year old boy who asserted gloomily: "I know I shall never be a man." So with the writer. Never make the foolish and illogical remark: "I know I shall never succeed at this rate." On the contrary, you can not help succeeding in good time, in the line along which you direct your growth.

The important thing is to cease anticipating the time of "arrival." As literary craftsmen, let us devote all our energies to making the best of present opportunities for exercise. Progress will be hampered, rather than advanced, by straining for recognition. Write as you would play a game. If your opponent bests you at tennis, do you feel that the time was wasted? Not if you are a true sportsman. Your interest was in the doing, not in the result. One who has acquired the proper poise studies his rejections without disappointment and tries to profit by his failures, because that is the way to develop skill. Serene in the consciousness that results will show in good time, he goes on writing and aiding his faculties in their normal development.

I like to think of a literary career as a long road winding pleasantly through groves and flower dotted fields. It is an uphill road, to be sure, but eventually it reaches the crest of a high hill where stand the gates of a splendid city—the City of Success. Now, there are two ways of traveling this road. Many of us see in it only a means of reaching the goal. So we struggle on toward the splendid gates, and wear ourselves out in the frenzied endeavor to arrive, only to discover, after a long period of toil, that the distance was deceptive—the city seems as far away as ever. No wonder that many give up the struggle and fall by the wayside in discouragement.

That is the wrong way to undertake any journey. To set ones eyes on the goal, ignoring the nearer beauties, is to make the way twice as long.

Suppose, on the contrary, that we look upon traveling the road as a pleasure jaunt. Our concern is not with arrival. We have undertaken the journey for its own sake—for the interesting experiences we may have along the way—for the pleasure of passing through shady groves and pausing to rest in daisy fields. With the true philosopher, each bit of writing is a delightful event—it means gathering flowers of experience by the wayside, and feeling

another accession of the mental health and vigor that comes from moderate, unstraining effort.

And mark: Those of us who have followed the road thus pleasantly and in leisurely fashion, knowing that, without fail, steady progress will eventually bring us up at the destination, are by no means left behind in the pilgrimage. We pass many on the road who have struggled so hard to reach the goal that they have fallen, discouraged and exhausted. When some of the frantic strugglers do arrive, they are so weary and nerve-racked that they cannot enjoy what they have attained; or else they are in a condition to lose their balance as a result of the sudden realization of their desires.

Those of us who have followed the path with the right mental attitude arrive at the City of Success in good time. We are invigorated by the climb and in a fit condition temperately to enjoy what the city has to offer the traveler. We do not lose our heads and plunge into excess with the first taste of triumph, because we have not lost much sleep over the prospect of arrival, and—well, to be frank, we are rather critical of the tawdry city. We almost wish that we were back on the shaded road, gathering flowers of experience—writing stories that always came back, though they meant, each one of them, a bit of our very life substance.

Let me quote from a letter which bears very strongly upon this question of the right mental attitude. It is from a writer who has achieved what many would call success—he has demonstrated his ability to sell stories to leading magazines. His letter bears so providentially on the question, that I cannot resist quoting it in full. I do not know when I have read a finer expression of the attitude of mind essential for literary progress. Here it is:

After floundering along for a year, I have a suspicion that I have hit the solution of my troubles, wholly by chance. It may interest you—perhaps you can use it on some other struggler some day.

You know my complaint that my early stories seemed to be written with the hard pedal tight down. Trying to get away from that, I swung to the other extreme, without realizing it, and made them all so flippant that no one would touch them. Back in December I got good and sore and said, frankly, if impolitely, "To thunder with the editors." I said, "I will sit down and write and write and write and invent things as I go along, without any fixed plan. Thus I will have a winter of enjoyment akin to reading a novel, only this will be better than any other novel, because everything will be exactly as I want it to be in the particular mood in which I may be at any given time."

Some nights I wrote two or three thousand words. Other times half a dozen. I wrote when I pleased and considered nothing except making that story drift along according to my mood. It stretched to twelve thousand words and I hadn't once looked back at it. I used to chuckle and say: "What a mess this is going to be when I read it—if I ever

do!" One night my wife picked it up and read it and said: "Son, that's the first piece of good writing you ever did. It's fine."

Just at that point I was sticking in a concluding episode, and when she read that, she protested. It didn't match the rest. "The trouble is," she said, "that I spoke of this as a story and immediately you began to think of it as a story, to plan on finishing it in a definite time, to think of editors and technique and form, and you've gone clear off the track."

I finished the story and read it over and it was as she said—I had dropped back, at that point, into the old hard pedal stuff, because I had resumed thought of the thing as a story and was trying to write. Now I am doing it over again—the last part. Lord knows what I shall do with it ultimately, but it is, as she said, the first real writing I have ever done. And here is the explanation:

The thing was, you might say, merely a series of jottings. The story was running along, hit or miss, in my head—though I had, in advance, a very definite acquaintance with my characters and knew whither I was tending. I had no reader to consider—I was the reader, and I knew everything, whether it got down on paper or not. If a character in a particular situation appealed to me, interested me, I spun that situation out in detail, having no necessity to worry about possible boredom for some future reader. Likewise, if I wanted to hustle along, I had no scruples about slighting a situation and passing on to the next. Moreover, I had absolutely no care for effects—and that, I find, was the real trouble before. I was trying so hard to make my words express emotion, say, instead of merely chronicling the emotion. In this story, if Jane wept all night, I did not stop and study and fret about how to convey a vivid picture of Jane weeping. I simply said: "Jane wept all night." I knew the picture—why bother and sweat to put it on paper? And behold, when I read the thing over, there was the most vivid picture of Jane weeping that I could possibly have painted. The thing struck me simply speechless when I read it. And what I had thought was hopelessly padded proved to be as gripping and interesting as could possibly be.

Of course, the answer is, Simplicity and Calmness. But I have been striving for just those things for years and never knew how to attain them until I stumbled on them. The story is not a great story—in fact it is crude. But the thing I have been seeking is there and I think it has given me the first hope I have ever cherished of some day writing really worth-while stuff.

PLOT AND CLIMAX ESSENTIALS. (*Concluded.*)

SURPRISE, we have seen, is one of the essential elements of plot effectiveness. It is more often than any other the factor that puts a story "across." A tale may contain all that we have designated in the first part of this article as essential—a solution which is logical but not obvious—and still it will lack that sudden, irresistible culmination of events at the climax which makes for "punch."

Suppose, for instance, that the solution of your difficulty consists in causing the hero to take a course in college. It is possible to devise a situation of which this would be the natural and yet not altogether obvious solution. To originate a rough instance, he might find himself in love with a country girl whose dying father

exacted from her a promise not to marry an uneducated man. This promise, we will say, was for the purpose of eliminating the hero from the race; but he overcomes his handicap by the solution mentioned.

Now such a climax, with its necessarily slow development, would be obviously ineffective. By the time the reader has followed the boy through college, the effectiveness of the idea will have evaporated. The action is not sharp and quick as it should be for dramatic power, but leisurely and long-drawn out.

Many themes are apparently unfitted for short story development because of this drawback. The short story culmination should be abrupt—sharply defined. A cloudburst is more dramatic than a drizzle. You experience a more definite shock from the sight of an aviator plunging to his death than from observing a victim of wasting illness, who is approaching death just as certainly, though more slowly. Suddenness, thus, is an important element of dramatic value. In many cases it may be said to give a story "punch." To have your hero go through college will not, of itself, make a vivid climax, no matter how well it solves the problem involved; because the action lacks this necessary quality.

But it is sometimes possible to employ such a solution by devising other basis for the surprise. Suppose we have the hero in the case under consideration come gradually to recognize that in solving his problem he has grown beyond the simple country girl he remembers, and no longer loves her. Thus another problem would be introduced in the solving of the first one. This second problem could be dramatically solved when they meet again and he discovers that the girl has more than kept pace with him.

Without an effective surprise of some kind, it may be said that few pieces of fiction find a market. The more striking the surprise, the more likely to sell—though, naturally, the quality of the market is dependent on literary value and other considerations. Sometimes, surprise may be given by letting the climax contain an unexpected revelation concerning the *motive* which caused the hero to solve the problem.

In a previous article, students were warned against too great a departure from the obvious. At first glance, the stress upon surprise may seem inconsistent with this. As a matter of fact, the two suggestions are entirely reconcilable. So far as possible, let the suddenness of your climax provide the surprise element. The solution should come at the moment when the action seems farthest from a satisfactory outcome. When our college graduate comes home to break his engagement with the simple country girl, is the time for him to make the discovery of her dazzling development during his absence.

Now, as to preparation for the climax. This is a delicate phase of story construction—or rather narration, since it is not until the story is being actually written that the difficulties become apparent. How often is the author in despair over a good idea that flattens because, in order to convey its meaning to the reader, the conclusion must be cumbered with explanations, description, and side-lights on character.

The less of these features, character drawing included, you have in your climax, the better rounded will it be. The place for your drawing of characters is in the preliminary narration. By the time you reach the climax we should know the story people so well that it is unnecessary to tell us *how* they did or said a thing. We should have such a clear picture of the scene, by this time, that no description is needed. We should have the key to all the action in advance, so that no explanations are necessary.

In the introduction, and, in fact, all through the narration preceding the climax, give us characterization and atmosphere in such doses as the action will permit. Remember that you are building for the climax. You impress upon us in the first part that the heroine has red-brown hair and speaks in a soft Southern drawl, in order that these details need not be mentioned at the last—thus, a simple statement of what she did will be sufficient to make us picture her as doing it. When you quote what she says at the conclusion, we naturally supply the tone in which the words were uttered.

From the foregoing discussion, a few simple rules for obtaining strength and balance in story structure may be deduced:

1. Plot consists of a problem and its solution.
2. The solution of the problem is the climax; and the climax, in a plot sense, is the story.
3. The three essentials of an effective climax are: It must be logical; it must not be too obvious; it must have a sudden, surprising culmination, for the sake of dramatic effect.
4. The germinal idea of the story, usually, should form the basis of the solution, or climax, rather than the basis of the problem.
5. You are not ready for the climax, until the characters have been brought to life in the reader's mind, so that bare, concise statements are all the reader needs in order to visualize the big scene.

I ASKED FOR OPINIONS!

SO unexpectedly encouraging has been the response to the first two issues of *The Student-Writer* that I acknowledge being more than a little bewildered. The many subscriptions and orders for criticism, typing, and similar service, are, of course, gratifying, for they insure the financial success of the "workshop." If subscription orders continue pouring in at the present rate, it will be possible, much sooner than I

anticipated, to secure second-class mailing privileges—which will permit of diverting the money now expended for postage into enlarging the magazine.

But more gratifying still are the encouraging letters that have winged their way from every source. I asked for opinions and suggestions; perhaps this "started things." If so, the paragraph in which I made the request was a happy inspiration. All of the suggestions are good, and they will be gratefully kept in mind in the planning of future issues.

The most important fact brought out through these letters was that the average student of writing craftsmanship wants, not theoretical, academic discussions of literary topics, but clear, simple, practical articles. As nearly as the subject permits, the desire is for suggestions that will do for the writer what a good cook book does for the housewife—give practical recipes for producing palatable stories and articles. This was the burden of many letters. I hope writers will not let me forget it, and that they will "call me down," if I fall into the error of talking over their heads. The following extracts are from representative letters:

I have your circular letter of recent date, also the January and February numbers of *The Student-Writer*. I was about to consign them to the silent unrummuring depths of the waste basket, when I stopped long enough to read the first paragraph of "Can We Afford to be Original?" This was so different from the "high falutin'" instructions that literary experts usually ladle out to new writers, or those who aspire to write, that I sat down and read the article through. Permit me to say, that is the first truthful article on the subject I ever read. I firmly believe that if you continue to take the people into your confidence and to tell them the truth, and the whole truth, plain and without any fake color or gyrations, you will soon have many friends.

I enclose twenty-five cents for one year's subscription to *The Student-Writer*. Your article on "Plot and Climax Essentials," in the February number, made that subject clear to me for the first time. My opinion is that the magazine will be of most help to young writers, if the matters discussed are presented in the simplest possible manner. I find that much of the advice to writers takes it for granted that you have passed the rudimental stage of the game—they talk over the heads of we ignorant beginners. Give us something we can understand well enough to use in our studying.

Last evening I attended a meeting of "The Short Story Club," organized in this city, introduced the subject of *The Student-Writer*, had the first article in the January number read, and secured a rising vote to subscribe en masse for the monthly visitor. You will soon hear from our secretary.

I read with interest every word in the January and February copies. I especially liked "An Aid to Standardization" in the January number. I have searched vainly all the books at my command, for some of the information given on those pages. I like your discussion of essentials of plot and climax. When you finish this, please discuss the opening of stories, also snapshot descriptions, which hit off a character so that he stands out in the story. How can characters be made vivid?

I acknowledge receipt of the two initial numbers of *The Student-Writer* and have read them both with interest. Other publications of this sort, of late years, have drifted more into the line of the "highbrow" dissertations of the "Bookman." I like your magazine because it is fresh, snappy, and right down on the level with the practical needs of the student.

In the language of Teddy Bigteeth, I am delighted. The copies of *The Student-Writer* came yesterday, and already you have caught a fish. If the other copies that you sent out catch as readily, the receipts of the Denver Postoffice will suddenly be greatly enhanced, and the postmaster will suffer a revision upward in salary. Enclosed find two dollars and a quarter; the quarter being for some more copies of *The Student-Writer*, the balance for a story which has never been refused. Each month I will send you one, and though I fully understand this means a long time before you discover my ability, or lack of ability, still, the closeness of the wolf, the high price of groceries, and the mortgage, which sticketh so tightly to my property that the grass will hardly grow, make it impossible to do otherwise.

Your little magazines have just arrived, and I am very much pleased with them. The leading article in each one was dandy. I don't see how you could have stated the case for originality any better, and I am convinced that every word of it is true. In the other number I think that your solution of the plots

"Six Inches of Water," and "A Nemesis of the Air" is a very good idea, and it ought to be as helpful to others as to me. Personally I'd be glad to see you include something of the kind often. The study of published plots, of which you may know the inside history, is of course especially convincing—calculated to give the groping beginner a feeling of special confidence. I am going to send you fifty cents for subscription to the magazine, along with a bunch of names that might prove interested, and to each of these names I will write a card, telling them that I have reason to know the value of your service.

I have just finished the first reading, or better, my first study of your "Student-Writer," Nos. 1 and 2, and from these have learned more of real worth to a writer, than has been gained from an extended search for help through other publications and written stuff. I am delighted! And with your complete equipment for your work, it is my belief that finally young writers have available in you facilities adequate to their needs—and worth the while and the expense of employing them. Congratulations, all round! I want the "Student-Writer," whatever the expense.

The Student-Writer is a gem of the first water; pages five and six of the January issue are worth a year's subscription to any writer.

Your announcement and the little news letters came to hand. The observation I made to myself was that they were mighty appealing—somehow different from the usual run. I think if I had received them from a stranger I should have been attracted by their genuineness and their modesty. I get so many that promise so much which I know they cannot fulfill. I like the baby magazine so well that I am sending my subscription for a year. I hope it will prosper and grow.

I am sending you twenty-five cents for the two numbers of The Student-Writer. If you think you owe me the other ten numbers, I certainly will be pleased to get them. I don't think you do; these two are worth a quarter. You had better issue one each week and ask us two dollars a year. Poor as I am, I would subscribe.

I wish you to know that, if every number of The Student-Writer contains as much knowledge for the reader as the two first ones do, you are actually giving something for nothing, and none can live doing that.

I am interested in the little magazine, The Student-Writer. I think I can stand two-bits, if you can stand a check, so herewith I enclose it. What captured me was the article, "Can We Afford to be Original?" In it you seemed to touch a vein which has set me to thinking. I have realized all you say, in a way and vaguely, but your article gives me a grip on this subject which I think will prove of benefit.

Please enroll me as a subscriber "for four years, or the war," as per enclosure. I certainly wish you every success and feel sure you will have it. If I meet any literary aspirants who need a helping hand, I'll try to steer them in your direction, thus doing both a good turn.

It is my intention to get all copies of The Student-Writer as they are issued. I like their meaty pertinence. Would not the inexperienced writer's entire problem be sensibly clearer, if the big subject of marketing were better understood in both its positive and relative aspects?

Today's mail brought me The Student-Writer. I was much impressed with the two copies. The rock-bottom way you have of explaining things is a source of inspiration. With the reading of the February issue, I suddenly saw light as to the way of handling a plot that has been rather chaotic to me.

Hundreds have found my thorough, detailed criticisms of value. The most frequent fee, (for prose manuscripts of 2,000 to 5,000 words), is \$2.00.

Manuscript typing, by trained experts, rate effective March 1st, 50 cents a thousand words; carbon copy included. Typing with Literary Revision, \$1.00 a thousand.

I am glad to correspond with earnest students concerning my practical one year's course in story writing.. Fee \$100.. Discount for advance payment.

Willard E. Hawkins,

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